

St Brandon's 21 February 2021. Lent 1.

Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

The Data matters....

It was wonderful to gather with many of you last Wednesday to mark the start of Lent. It feels to me that we need the cycle of the church's year more than ever now, to sustain us through long and dark days. Many people have said they forget which day of the week it is, and I'm not immune, as Nick will tell you. Thankfully I've managed to remember Sundays, so far!

This Sunday is the first in Lent, when we traditionally recall Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. From here we journey through the weeks until we reach Palm Sunday on 28th March, then Holy week, Good Friday on 2nd April and Easter Day on 4th.

But I'm straying into the territory of newsletters, Navigator and notices and, in keeping with current advice, we need to focus on **data, not dates**.

So here's some data and a few big numbers (SLIDE Row 1) Plenty of big numbers around at the moment—the bigger the better when talking about vaccinations, the smaller the better when counting the cost of the coronavirus pandemic. So here we go:

25,640 23,343 18,658 14,949

If we were all in church there'd be a few hands up by now, keen to tell us what these stats signify. Mike Higton would be banned from answering because he's far too good at both theology and numbers... Here's another clue and Mike, no posting answers in the chat! 3rd, 1st, 4th, 2nd

Did you get it? This *data* is the word count for each of the four gospels in the New Testament

That is, *Luke*, the third gospel has well over 25,000 words; *Matthew* has just over 23,000; *John*, the fourth gospel has over 18,000, but *Mark*, where we find ourselves today and for much of this year, has less than 15,000 words in his account of Jesus' life and ministry.

There's no waffle in Mark, and Chapter 1 is a prime example. Mark writes a very powerful prologue, starting like this: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Verses 2 and 3 quote the prophet Isaiah and take us straight to John the Baptist for 5 verses, and then just 9 verses into Mark's account, Jesus bursts onto the scene.

Or at least he does to us, because we know who he is. The way Mark writes it is more like:

'One day Stan from Spennymoor in county Durham turned up by the River Thames to be baptised.'

Nazareth in Galilee was not the place you'd expect a King to grow up. But this is God's story, and when did God ever do the expected thing?

Jesus' arrival may have been ordinary and unremarkable, but his baptism is not. As we thought last month, and again with Grace last week, God affirms Jesus' identity as his Son, whom he loves. It's both deeply personal for Jesus, embarking on the work he is sent to do, and a message to the whole world, from that moment onwards, that God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son.

All that in 3 verses, but Mark moves on again in v12:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan: and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

We're going to look more closely at these two verses. Let's start with the data!

40 days – 40 is a round number in the Bible –
40 days is what we might call 'about 6 weeks' –

a period which feels extremely long when you are a child starting the summer holidays, and less positively so when waiting for a hospital appointment or, dare I say, to see your loved ones when lockdown lifts. It's a much shorter period if you are trying to complete school projects or college essays, or find a builder in a hurry!

40 days (and forty nights).

That's how long Jesus was in the wilderness, scorching hot by day, freezing cold by night.

It is also how long it rained at the time of the great flood in Genesis chapter 7, and how long the ark rested on Mount Ararat as the waters subsided, while Noah and his family waited for release, rescue and new life, just before the passage which Jayne read to us today.

Later on as God's people journeyed in the desert towards the promised land, for 40 years, Moses went up Mount Sinai for 40 days, waiting for the gift of the ten commandments.

The data tells us a lot. 40 days. 40 days to wait, trust and obey.

For Noah, the rainbow covenant came at the end of those 40 days of sunshine, which reversed the 40 days of rain – a new dawn, fresh beginnings, all under the bow which signified by God's everlasting promise.

We live under that promise today, despite all that we continue to do to destroy God's world.

For Moses too, there were 40 days of waiting, trusting and obeying, before he received God's law. The law established and shaped God's people's relationships with him and each other, also held by the covenant, by God's promise to guide, provide and bless his people.

And for Jesus, the covenant relationship has been confirmed at his baptism but will not be lived out until he has spent 40 days in the wilderness.

He doesn't start to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to call his disciples or to teach, heal, release and bless people, until the 40 days have been accomplished.

Jesus wasn't let off anything when he became a human being.

As it says in Hebrews, he was tempted as we are, yet without sin.

I've often thought of that more as Jesus resisting another cup of wine, or too many of his mother's homemade cakes, Jesus not shouting at his brothers or showing his frustration at his disciples...

But what if the testing for Jesus was more about

Waiting- when the future was unknown and frightening,

Trusting – when God seemed absent, his mouth and heart parched and his mind beset by questions, doubts and misgivings.

And **obeying** – continuing to look to God, no matter what happened and no matter where he was,

Jesus had to wait, trust and obey, just as we do, and he did it all...

He also felt the touch of angels, those messengers of God's love, in the small details of life, day by day by 40 days.

Yes, **the data matters.**

Let us spend the next 40 days **waiting, trusting, obeying** as Jesus did, and yes, looking for the angels who attend us too, by God's goodness.

I can't resist one final nod to **data**- animals this time- for they, along with God's covenant love, link our two Bible readings today, and speak so powerfully into our time, I believe.

Noah gathered and counted the animals into the ark, **two by two**, to ensure all were saved.

We can be certain a larger number came off the ark than went onto it – perhaps too many for Noah to count!

Jesus, embarking on his mission to save the world and all its creatures, was with the wild animals in the wilderness.

Some commentators have linked this being with the animals to Adam, naming and care for all living creatures as the world began. Possibly.

Today I'd like us to see the animals with Jesus as a reminder that part of the salvation Jesus brings is for the whole world, in all its interdependence and diversity.

And I believe that part of the testing we will undergo as Christians in the coming weeks, months and years is to be obedient and follow Noah, in rescuing, prioritising and caring for our fellow creatures, who are likewise threatened with extinction as a result of humanity's selfishness and greed.

But praise God, and here's my final piece of **data**:

God saved a remnant through **one** righteous man, Noah, and even more wonderfully, God saves all people for all time through **one** Saviour, his only Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.